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Building a greener railway:

lineside vegetation management
for nature and people in Scotland

Introduction

Tackling climate change is a moral obligation that we owe to succeeding generations. The Scottish Government has set out plans for Scotland to transition to net-zero emissions for the benefit of our environment, our people, and our prosperity. Scotland's world-leading climate change legislation sets a target date for net-zero emissions of all greenhouse gases by 2045.

Our transport systems have a key role in the achievement of the targets and, in respect of the railway, the Scottish Government has stated that Scotland's passenger rail services will be decarbonised by 2035. At a practical level, this means that ScotRail will not be able to use diesel traction for any of its passenger services beyond that date.

The change in traction energy from diesel to other sources such as electric, battery or fuel cell, necessarily means substantial changes to our rail infrastructure and this is particularly so in respect of either full or discontinuous electrification of the network.

These necessary infrastructure changes to address climate change have brought to the fore a need to set out our policy context so that the impact on the railway's lineside estate of electrification, or indeed other works to improve the operation and safety of the railway, is implemented in an appropriate manner with due consideration of the natural environment through which our rail network operates as well as engagement with lineside neighbours.

Our policy statement on lineside vegetation management sets out our expectations for Network Rail in Scotland but, in so doing, recognises that Network Rail has Britain-wide obligations and licence conditions and, accordingly, the statement is in the context of those broader obligations.

The report *Valuing nature - a railway for people and wildlife* (known commonly as the 'Varley Report') commissioned by the UK Government, with a restricted focus to a review of Network Rail's vegetation management across its estate in England and Wales, sets out six recommendations for how vegetation management on the railway could be maintained.

The first of those recommendations advised the Department for Transport (DfT) to outline a clear policy position for Network Rail in delivering for the environment. In its response we note that the DfT will ensure that the terms of Network Rail's licence with the DfT are amended before Control Period 7 (2024-2029) to reflect the policy set out within the DfT policy document *Enhancing Biodiversity and Wildlife on the Lineside*. We note and welcome this approach.

The five remaining recommendations of the Varley Report were addressed to Network Rail. In its reply, *Response to the review of our vegetation management*, Network Rail sets out how it will address issues of governance, vision, culture, communication and biodiversity in the management of its lineside estate. Though the Varley Report was focussed on England & Wales, Network Rail has made clear that

it will address and implement measures with reference to all of its estate, including Scotland. We note and welcome the approach taken by Network Rail.

Our policy statement on lineside vegetation management supplements statements of the UK Government and sets out specific expectations for Network Rail in Scotland, and it does so reflecting that the management and operation of Network Rail activities in Scotland are funded and, particularly in respect of infrastructure developments such as electrification, directed by the Scottish Government.

Policy statement:

- we expect Network Rail to maintain a comprehensive, accessible, up-to-date website which clearly sets out information relating to its policies, strategies and actions in respect of the management of lineside vegetation and engagement with lineside neighbours
- we expect Network Rail to follow best practice in the management of its lineside estate, drawing from the experience of other bodies within the UK and internationally, and updating its approach, as and when necessary, to reflect changes in the regulatory framework
- we expect Network Rail to engage with lineside neighbours in advance of planned works, such as infrastructure to enable the operation of electrified rolling stock, so that information is provided to those who are likely to be affected by the works. It is expected that engagement will take many forms and that when meetings are required they are held, as far as is practicable, at a time and venue that enables neighbours to attend
- we expect Network Rail to carry out ecological surveys and inspections prior to the commencement of planned works. We expect those surveys to be carried out by appropriately qualified individuals or organisations and for the results or reports of such surveys to be made available on request within a reasonable timeframe, recognising that information about protected, rare or vulnerable species may have to be redacted or presented with due circumspection
- we expect Network Rail to employ suitably trained and experienced individuals to manage and deliver vegetation works and to take advice from appropriately qualified individuals or organisations on its management and replanting of trees, hedgerows and other vegetation types
- we expect Network Rail to minimise the ecological and environmental impact of its vegetation management, without compromising the safe and reliable operation of the railway. Where it is not safe or practical to mitigate habitat loss on its lineside estate, we expect Network Rail to make use of opportunities to improve biodiversity elsewhere on its estate or more widely. Where offsetting is used to compensate for unavoidable habitat loss, the actions should be ecologically relevant to the offset site, rather than the original site
- we expect Network Rail when undertaking vegetation management associated with planned works such as infrastructure to enable the operation of electrified rolling stock to pay particular attention to fence repair, the removal of litter and invasive species as well as conducting vermin control, where required and as appropriate
- we expect Network Rail to work in partnership with its lineside neighbours and relevant parties to ensure, as far as is practicable, that its lineside estate

contributes to improving the biodiversity of the local area, and also maximises the value and connectivity of its lineside estate as wildlife corridors

- we expect Network Rail to have documented processes and procedures in place to minimise the risk of inappropriate vegetation management
- we expect, in addition to managing vegetation in order to install infrastructure, ensuring the operational safety and maintaining the ecological biodiversity of the lineside, that Network Rail pays particular attention to the visual amenity offered by the railway to passengers, particularly on rural routes, and ensures that vegetation is controlled and maintained so as to facilitate views from the train in line with its obligations within *The Scottish Ministers' High Level Output Specification for Control Period 6*



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Published by Transport Scotland, January 2020

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